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## SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE REGIONS: THE PODLASIE CASE

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### **Abstract**

The concept of sustainability seems fundamental for companies operating worldwide. Human resources are acknowledged to be among the most valuable assets for them. Even though literature shows that Sustainable Human Resource Management is an upcoming topic there is still limited research on the concept due to its initial state. Prior literature reveals a lack in the consideration of systematic links between sustainability and HRM. The purpose of the study is to present the sociological approach to Sustainable Human Resource Management. The paper contributes to the literature linking sustainability to the issues researched in HRM literature. In the introduction it discusses how the notion of sustainability has emerged and developed. Then the sociological approach to Sustainable Human Resource Management is briefly depicted. Next, Diversity Management is presented as the manifestation of the social approach to Sustainable Human Resource Management. To illustrate this approach, the empirical research is presented. It has been conducted among 32 companies operating in Podlasie region (northeastern part of Poland). The research tried to uncover the companies' knowledge and consciousness of cultural (religious) diversity. It also aimed at finding out whether this diversity was seen as an advantage and taken opportunity of or rather neglected in the companies. The results show the reception of diversity among larger and smaller enterprises in the Podlasie region. In general, smaller companies tend to know the religion of the worker more often, and therefore are able to take advantage of it. The larger companies tend to treat faith as a personal matter.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, HRM, Social Approach to SHRM, Podlasie

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### **1. Introduction**

In the 21st century, sustainability and sustainable development - applied as synonyms for long-term, durable, sound, and systematic - have become a critical issue for the world and for business in particular. Companies have found themselves in need to develop more sustainable business models, in which the HR function has a key role to play. The understanding of sustainability has been influenced by three main groups: ecologists, business strategists, and the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development, called the Brundtland Commission.

Ecologists' view on sustainability is said to have been coined in 1712 by the German nobleman Hans Carl von Carlowitz, and referred to the sustainable production of wood. In the 1970s, the term was adapted by the ecological movement concerned with the over-exploitation of natural resources of the planet. While ecologists focus on sustainability's ecological

dimension – the protection of the natural environment – the traditional goal of business strategy scholars is an economic sustainability of organizations. Business strategists link the term sustainability with sustainable competitive advantages. The Brundtland Commission added a social dimension to the ecological and economic ones, defining sustainable development as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Since its dissemination through the Brundtland Report, the notion of sustainability has been associated with ecological issues in business practice primarily. In the recent years however, the focus on the social dimension of sustainability has become increasingly important.

The diffusion of research and practice such as Corporate Social Responsibility or Corporate Sustainability has contributed to the interest in sustainability linked to Human Resources issues.

## **2. Sustainability in Human Resources Management**

Today's approaches using the notion of sustainability in HRM and HR-related literature deal with one or more origins of sustainability described previously. Prior research linking sustainability to the problems relevant for HRM can be traced in the literature on Strategic HRM, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Work Systems as well as Sustainable HRM. The approaches identified in this literature differ with regard to the origin of their understanding of sustainability, their objectives, focus, and theoretical foundations. One of the most interesting attempts to capture the complexity of the concept of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) is De Prins' holistic model consisting of four approaches to Sustainable HRM.

De Prins (2011 cited in Rompa, 2011, pp.16-18) argues Sustainable HRM focuses on optimally utilizing and respecting human workforces within the organization, in which an explicit relationship is built between an organization's strategic policies and its environment. Long-term vision and integration with an organization's strategy and CSR-policy are key points. Sustainability transported to the business level is referred to as Corporate Sustainability. Corporate Sustainability used to put most emphasis on the effects businesses have on the environment, while Corporate Social Responsibility also incorporated a social dimension, their separate paths have been noted to grow into convergence.

## **3. The Social Approach to SHRM**

The sociological approach aims at socializing HRM practices. This specific form of personnel management is long-term focused and aims at continuity, whereby the interests of the employer, the employee and society are explicitly connected. Concretely translated, valuable themes are engagement policies, health policies and social themes like diversity, age-conscious and family-friendly personnel policies.

Diversity has been an evolving concept. Many writers define diversity as any significant difference that distinguishes one individual from another - a description that encompasses a broad range of overt and hidden qualities. Generally, researchers organize diversity characteristics into four areas: personality (traits, skills and abilities), internal (gender, race, ethnicity, I.Q., sexual orientation), external (culture, nationality, religion, marital or parental status), and organizational (position, department, union/non-union). The trend in defining diversity seems to favor a broad definition, one that goes beyond the visible differences. One of the first researchers to use this inclusive definition, R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., was crucial in moving diversity thinking beyond narrow categories. He argued that to manage diversity successfully, organizations must recognize that race and gender are only two out of many diversity factors. Managers and leaders must expand their perspective on diversity to include a variety of other dimensions (Thomas, 1992). Workplace diversity management, in his model, is also inclusive, defined as a "comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees" (Thomas, 1992, p.10). This general definition also enables all staff to feel included, permitting them to connect and fortify relationships that enable employees to deal with more potentially volatile issues which may arise later.

Creating and applying effective diversity management concepts is one of the main challenges in modern organizations (Mazur, 2009). Comprehensive diversity management is a strategic approach and attitude towards understanding differences in organizations and teams.

Diversity strategies use diversity as a strategic resource for complex problem solving (Aretz and Hansen, 2003). By planning and implementing corporate organizational practices in leadership and team work, potential advantages of diversity can be maximized and disadvantages, like the conflict potential, are minimized. This is achieved by increasing the ability of all employees to contribute to organizational goals and to achieve their full potential unhindered by group identities such as gender, race, nationality, age, and departmental affiliation (Cox, 1991).

Diversity means dissimilarity, variety, and individuality that emerge from various differences between people. Diversity of individual abilities, experiences, competencies, and qualifications of human resources builds a success factor in organizations, which enables entrepreneurial strategies to increase flexibility and learn continuously. Managing Diversity is more than a program. It is an attitude and a new understanding of how enterprises function and how to manage human resources in a sustainable way.

#### **4. Cultural Diversity in Enterprises from Podlasie**

One form of diversity is cultural diversity. This type is primarily a diversity of values. It is recognized that the study of values is an appropriate and necessary part of the study of culture. Values are an essential element of almost any definition of culture and are often used to operationalize the concept of corporate culture (Blazejewski, 2010).

Other important sources of cultural values include religion. Every religion creates its own proper cultural system (Greertz, 1992). Geography and history have created a situation in which, despite frequent territorial changes, Podlasie was and still is a place of different religions coexistence. Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Tatars, Russians, Germans and Jews lived here side by side for centuries. Today, from this peculiar religious mosaic mainly two Christian confessions remained: Catholic and Orthodox. Companies operating in this region seem to be the proper subject of study because many of them employ workers from different religious backgrounds.

Diversity management appears more and more often in literature concerning modern management conceptions. Diversity management is a personnel management strategy which is based on creating organizational culture that would let each worker realize his/her potential so that the company grows businesswise as well as builds a competitive advantage. It is such an approach to management that focuses on every single organizational act aiming to use the cultural diversity in the workplace as fully as possible. The issue has been given much attention already in the English literature from the theoretical perspective as well as from the practical one. In Polish literature, however, this subject is not very common. This approach is interested especially in the diversity values and aimed at the companies in the Podlasie region.

##### **4.1. Subject and Scope of the Study**

The subject of the study is the level of knowledge about different cultural values, characteristic for the external environment, in companies. The study included 32 companies operating in the most religiously diverse parts of the region of Podlasie, which is in the districts of Białystok, Hajnowka, Siemiatycze, Bielsk-Podlaski and Sokolka. Half of the surveyed companies belong to the 100 largest ones in Podlasie<sup>1</sup> (published in the list of Golden Hundred Companies of Podlasie). In the study, they are called large companies, the other half represented small and medium-sized enterprises (companies not included in the list of Golden Hundred Companies of

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<sup>1</sup>Golden Hundred Companies of Podlasie is an annual ranking of the best companies operating in Podlasie morning organized by Courier based on the following criteria: a relatively high profit from the sale, the largest power income and the best use of available resources (assets).

Podlasie). This selection of varied companies' sizes is helpful in achieving a more holistic and panoramic view on the way companies approach religious diversity.

#### 4.1.1. The Purpose and the Research Hypothesis

The aim of this study was the perception of diversity of employees representing the Catholic and Orthodox culture in enterprises operating in Podlasie. The following thesis has been set: In Podlasie, awareness of cultural (religious) specificity in the companies' environments is present. This specificity is expressed by the diversity of values in the company, but it is not used for forming a pro-active approach to diversity.

#### 4.1.2. The Research Methodology-Research Tools

The selection of the research sample was purposeful. The study included companies representing different industries: traditional, as mining or railway, municipal and building companies, as well as companies involved in new technologies, such as telecommunications. The study was conducted on the basis of a five-stages-model test, shown in Figure 1. A standardized direct interview was the method applied in the survey. As for the people surveyed, they were the heads of HR departments or persons responsible for Human Resources Management.

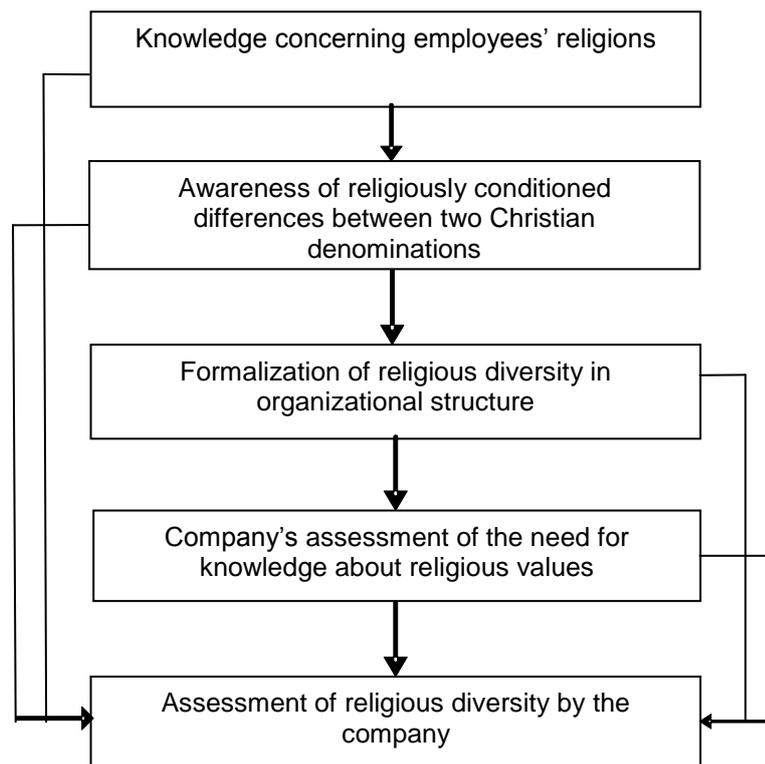


Figure 1. Research Model of the Level of Diversity Reception in the Enterprise

#### 4.2. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Questions from the first part of the study served to evaluate the knowledge about employees' confessions. 31 companies admitted that employees adhere to different religions. Some answers contained additional information detailing the religious composition of employees, such as: "2/3 Catholics, 1/3 Orthodox, per 300 employees", "half of the workers are Orthodox, half

are Catholics", "for about 60 people half are Catholic, half - Orthodox" or more than 30% are Orthodox, the others - Catholics". In only one company all the employees belong to the same religion. The knowledge about denominations of individual workers was declared in 25 companies, while in 7 it was confirmed for only a part of the staff. Out of these 7 companies, 5 belong to a group of large enterprises, and 2 represent a group of small and medium enterprises.

The second step diagnosed the knowledge of cultural differences between the faiths represented by the employees in enterprises. This kind of knowledge was declared in 18 enterprises, while 14 replied negatively. Among the companies, whose managers are aware of the differences, small and medium-sized enterprises dominated, (there were 11 of them in total), while the remaining 7 were large companies. In 13 enterprises it was also admitted that managers know and observe the differences in the perception of values by the employees of different faiths; in 19 - it was not. The number of companies, that responded confirming the knowledge of values of employees with different cultural backgrounds, was more than twice as big in the case of small and medium-sized companies than large ones.

Then, the workers' behavior, resulting from different cultural values, was questioned. The existence of conflicts on that background was confirmed by four companies (2 large and 2 belonging to the group of small and medium-sized), 28 remaining companies stated that there were no conflicts over differences in cultural values. Active engagement in conflict resolution was confirmed by one company, representing small and medium-sized enterprises, the other three companies did not declare engaging in solving problems arising from different cultural values. None of the companies had in its structures a person whose formal duties would be resolving conflicts arising from the staff's different religious backgrounds. In the light of such statements, an attempt was made to find out who in the company frequently helps to resolve a conflict, or who could resolve a potential conflict if it ever emerged. The precise status of such a person in the company was the subject of the next question. The responses pointed to: the company's management or an immediate supervisor, owner, deputy manager, trade unions, boss and head of sections, heads of departments, chief HRM, Operational Director, CEO - an ad hoc basis, moreover - a random person.

In the next part of the study a diagnosis was subjected to assess the need for knowledge about the cultural values of managers and other employees in the company. The 12 companies recognized that managers have sufficient knowledge about effective conflict resolution of workers of different faiths because they themselves come from mixed Orthodox-Catholic families, while in 17 companies this kind of competence was rated insufficient. The knowledge of the values of religions present in the Podlasie region was considered necessary for all workers in the 17 surveyed enterprises, in 14 enterprises it has not been regarded as necessary.

The final part of the study aimed at obtaining information on the perception of the effects of workers' religious diversity on the functioning of the enterprise. As specified in the management theory, the scale of effects may be associated with the cognitive effect of diversity, signifying a higher degree of creativity and more effective actions, and the symbolic effect, meaning a better image and a greater spectrum of potential employees. Both of these effects are positive for the organization. They can also be associated with the affective effect and communicative effect, which in turn are negative. The former means less commitment to the organization's activity resulting from the fact that workers prefer to work with people similar to themselves; the second shows the difficulties in communication within a group or across the organization, resulting from the diversity of values (Milliken and Martins, 1996).

The question if companies notice less involvement of employees when working with people of other faiths resulted in 32 responses indicating nonexistence of the affective effect. When asked whether the company noticed a higher level of creativity and innovation among employees when working with people of other faiths, 31 companies answered negatively. Thus, with regard to the effect of cognitivism, it was not reported in all but one company. The question of whether workers of different faiths can cause the company to have a better image and greater opportunities in the labor market (symbolic effect) divided the respondents to the greatest extent. Eight companies confirmed that by employing workers of different faiths, they will have a better image and greater opportunities in the labor market, 23 - decided that it will

not affect the company's image, in one case no response was given. The answers to the question whether companies notice a deterioration of communication between employees when working with people of other faiths has not confirmed the existence of communication effect. None of the 32 surveyed companies confirmed the fact of communication worsening in the conditions of multi-faith of a workforce.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude the results of the survey, it should be noted that the surveyed companies employ Catholic and Orthodox workers and in most cases their religion is known. Many of them, especially those that are part of the group of small and medium-sized enterprises, consider the knowledge of the staff's religion important, primarily because of the need to preserve the smooth organization of work. Some companies consciously choose a certain number of employees of individual faiths to maintain smooth operation during periods of religious holidays as the Orthodox and Catholics celebrate them in different time frames. Among the companies that do not know the religions of their employees, the largest in the region prevail. The smaller ones are more familiar with religion of their employees and are able to take advantage of this knowledge, at least in part, to implement the intended objectives. Companies belonging to the largest in the region do not see the issue of religion in the workplace and treat religion solely as a matter of the private lives of employees.

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